

Programs ready to help residents pay home-cooling costs

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Carrie Robinson's sons should breathe easier this summer.

Lorenzo, 11, and Michael, 12, have asthma.

They're the reason Robinson applied for an air-conditioner voucher yesterday at Columbus Leads on E. Broad Street. She hopes it will keep her sons out of the hospital, something that's happened twice in the past few months.

Robinson is among 5,000 Franklin County residents whom Columbus Leads expects to help with cooling costs this summer.

Low-income households with senior citizens or those with medical conditions also might be eligible for help through the state's Summer Crisis Program, another program provided through Columbus Leads, which runs through Aug. 31.

"I think it can benefit a lot of people if they knew about" the programs, Robinson, of the North Side, said.

Qualified people can receive a voucher for a free air-conditioner or up to \$200 to help with energy bills.

About 400 central Ohioans were served Thursday, the first day people could apply, said Fredericka Wallace-Deena, director of human services for Columbus Leads.

Air-conditioner vouchers were distributed to 230 people. The rest received assistance for their energy bills.

Columbus Leads helped 3,000 people last summer.

Who qualifies

To qualify for the Home Energy Assistance Program, households must have a senior citizen 60 or older, or have a doctor's documentation of medical need, and must be at or below 175 percent of the 2005-06 poverty income level:

SIZE OF HOUSEHOLD	INCOME UP TO
1	\$17,150
2	\$23,100
3	\$29,050
4	\$35,000
5	\$40,950
6	\$46,900
7	\$52,850
8	\$58,800

Source: State of Ohio

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"Our numbers were lower last summer because I think a lot of people thought the service went away," Wallace-Deena said. People were more familiar with the Columbus Metropolitan Area Community Action Organization, the previous provider.

Leads (the Licking County Economic Action Development Study) took over for CMAAO in May 2005.

The Breathing Association also offers cooling assistance for Franklin County residents.

Colette Harrell, the organization's Home Energy Assistance Program director, said the group served 1,000 customers last year.

Harrell said economic hardships and high energy costs could cause more people to seek help this year.

"Because of the high energy bills this winter, people are still trying to recover from making those higher payments," she said. "They don't have the income they had last summer."

Harrell said the customer base also has changed. She's seeing more people who lost their white-collar jobs and need temporary help.

"Many of them are not intending to be on the program next year," she said.

Since the program started in 1998, the Breathing Association has assisted 8,000 people in Franklin County. More people apply each year.

The Ohio Department of Development administers the heating- and cooling-assistance programs. The department allocated \$8 million for the 2006 program, up \$1.4 million from last year.

Despite a mild winter, high energy costs exhausted the money allocated for the heating-assistance program.

"The winter season maybe didn't get as cold as it could have," said Holly Pendell, spokeswoman for the Department of Development. "We served a record number of Ohioans largely because of the gas prices soaring."

The state assisted 510,000 through the winter program and expects to help 45,000 this summer.

For more information or to set up an appointment with Columbus Leads, located at 1808 Broad St., call 614-917-2444. For the Breathing Association, located at 1520 Old Henderson Rd., call 614-457-4570. Both organizations serve Franklin County residents.

